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by journalist
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Catholic opposition silenced

DILI (Svenska Dagbladet)
Famine, disease and war have cost the lives of tens of thousands of people during the ten-year old unresolved conflict in East Timor.

In 1976, Indonesia proclaimed East Timor as its 27th province after 450 years as a Portuguese colony. The United Nations has still not recognized the takeover and the national organization of East Timorian independence, Fretilin, remains active, although there is not much they can do against the Indonesian military forces.

Svenska Dagbladet paid a visit to the province recently, a privilege granted only very rarely to foreign journalists.

While in East Timor, the local government representatives never left the side of this journalist. In other words, it is not possible to move freely, but the visit nevertheless provided opportunity for insight into conditions in this remote region permitted few people.

Catholic opposition

SvD requested an interview with the catholic bishop in the capital city of Dili but the request was denied. Neither were we permitted to meet any of the catholic priests. In contrast to Indonesia, which is Islamic, roughly 80% of the population of East Timor is catholic. The catholic church has openly told of conditions in this province, probably so openly that the government authorities would not like to see any more communication between priests and foreign reporters.

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After the Portuguese revolution in 1974, Portugal set about decolonizing its holdings in Africa and East Timor. While the United Nations discussed the fate of the province, the Fretilin, the revolutionary front for an independent East Timor, proclaimed the colony's independence in November of 1974. Within a week, Indonesian troops attacked, Portuguese residents fled and a bloody revolution ensued. On July 17, 1976, Indonesia proclaimed East Timor to be its 27th province.

Occupation a fact

The United Nations has never officially recognized the occupation but there is hardly any doubt that a growing number of nations today regard the current status of the island as an undeniable fact. If a vote were to be held in the United Nations now, Indonesia's sovereignity there would be recognized, but the question has not been raised since 1983. At that time Norway asked that the matter be tabled, a proposal that came up again during my visit to East Timor.

It's an experience finding yourself in a territory in which the most flagrant violations of human rights have been perpetrated only to hear how grateful the local government authorities were that Norway's proposal on East Timor led to a postponement of a decision in the United Nations.

In the capital city of Dili, with its 80 000 inhabitants, life seems calm. Not too many soldiers can be seen. The 14 600 square kilometre island has a population of about 630 000 inhabitants.

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Poor education

Most of the people in positions of responsibility do not come from East Timor, a situation which could possibly stem from the fact that the Portuguese only left one single person with a university education in East Timor after they fled the region so abruptly more than ten years ago.

Indonesia is investing major resources in education here. There are 111 doctors and approximately 500 East Timorians attend university at various sites in Indonesia. Of the 138 000 children between the ages of seven and twelve in East Timor, 120 000 now go to school.

In October of last year, a university was opened in Dili and the first students have begun studying there, but there are shortages of textbooks and teaches. Nevertheless, there is no denying that today's rulers are doing much more than the Portuguese to educate the people.

The area also suffers from a range of other problems. Diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria are extremely widespread. In some districts, more than 30% of the population have malaria and child mortality is at least 120 out of every 1 000 babies born, while 40% of the children are undernourished. The average life span of the people of East Timor is estimated to be fifty years of age.

Another problem is that between 60 and 70% of the population is illiterate. Only 13% have access to clean water. Unemployment has reached such high levels that it is impossible to register any more. This official statistic says, in all its brutality, something about the situation in East Timor today.

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The government authorities have given East Timor top priority and this applies also to the military presence there. We encountered crack government troops there under the leadership of a colonel who is a specialist in jungle warfare.

While I was travelling through the country, I had the opportunity of meeting the governor, Mario Vegas Carrascaiao as well as the military commander, Colonel Yunus Yosfiah. Both gave me the impression of being open, professional and capable representatives of their country. They both answered questions willingly but painted a picture of conditions in East Timor that contrasted starkly with all the independent reports coming from people that I spoke with in Indonesia.

The 42-year-old commander explained in his charming manner that the liberation movement, Fretilin, is not a factor of power in East Timor today. Fretilin was formed in 1974 and it is a national movement, fighting for the independence of the province. Colonel Yosfiah argues that it would be wrong to speak of Fretilin as an organization as such. He thinks that they have a maximum of 150 armed men and that months can pass by without any skirmishes between the guerillas and the government troops. He says that of his 3 000 strong force, only 11 soldiers have been killed over the past year.

Independent observers to whom SvD spoke, dispute the colonel's claims. They attest that Fretilin although not a powerful force is far from eliminated and that the organization has probably between 700 and 1 000 men who are armed. The colonel's claims that the military forces number no more than 3 000 troops is dismissed as propaganda and according to these people 15 000 is a more accurate figure. The statement that 11 soldiers have died in one year is considered to be far too low. Sources state that a battle in December of last year cost the lives of 32 soldiers.

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East Timor is totally dependent on financial assistance from Djakarta. In other words the province has no sources of income of its own and foreign investment is non-existent. The province is closed, not only to foreigners but also to "ordinary" Indonesians.